Center for Modern Greek Studies

Greek American Oral History Project
Transcription

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I: May 2001. This is the Greek American Oral History project interview of Dr. Leonidas Petrakis by Patricia Yost. Also in attendance is Gentle Wagner, project coordinator for this oral history pilot project. Dr. Petrakis, I'd like to start off the interview by asking when and where you were born.

Petrakis: Patty, first let me thank you for inviting me here with you and Gentle on this very beautiful San Francisco morning. Yes, I'll be very happy to answer questions and I guess we do have to start back. I was born in Sparta. I moved to Athens when I was 11 years old and I came to the United States – east coast when I was 16 years old and I have lived all my life here in the States, different places, although I do go back to Greece quite often.

I: Can you reflect on your childhood a little and tell us how your life was in Sparta and then in Athens?

Petrakis: Yes, I guess we should touch on that aspect of my life. It is both very pleasant kind of thing to think back, but also it's quite painful. I was born in Sparta in a reasonably well to do family. My father was a pharmacist. But then, when the Second World War came-

I: May I ask, I'm sorry but, when you were born to get a chronological order of things.

Petrakis: Yes, I was born in 1936, July 23 in Sparta. And I was born on a home at the time at St. Nikon, N-I-K-O-N, Street. St. Nikon is the patron saint of Sparta, very famous man and a very interesting man, saint. But, did I answer your question?

I: Yes, but then you were going to tell us about, because of the second world war, I wondered about your age.

Petrakis: Yes, I was six years old when the Germans occupied Greece in April of 1941. I remember quite vividly their arrival. They bombed us with their notorious stukas guide bombers. They were chasing British, and Greek soldiers were trying to escape to Crete and to North Africa. They occupied Greece until, together with the Italians, until the Fall of 1944. The Italians who were pretty bad, but the Germans were absolutely horrendous. It was a very scary experience. It turns out that 1941 a combination of probably the worst winter in 100 years in Greece plus the occupation made for a very, very terrible time. People were dying off literally in the street and in the big cities, Athens, and so on. The municipal carts were carting off the dead off the street every morning. The occupation, that I remember, uh, and I lived through in Sparta was quite horrendous. The low point came in 1943 when, by that time, the guerilla forces had been quite successful fighting the Nazis who were occupying Greece. And when the Italians capitulated, Germans took over Greece quite by themselves. And of course, they were very bad towards the Italians and also of course the Greeks. Because passage of time makes us forget things like these, and maybe in some quarters there's also an unfortunate romanticizing about such events, I would like to relate one or two events just to calibrate for my remembrance of that period. In the summer of 1943, Hitler personally assigned the Gestapo officer who was responsible for the destruction of Warsaw to come to Greece and to teach the Greeks the same kind of lesson they had taught to the Jews of Warsaw. Greece, or the main parts of Greece, were declared free fire zones and-

I: What does that mean? Did you-

Petrakis: It means that they can go in, the occupying troops, and demolish homes, kill. In fact, they put a formal order in place that for every German that the guerrillas would kill, the Germans would execute 50 hostages. And they did round up people and they did shoot them.

I: Did you experience any of that in your family or did you see any?

Petrakis: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. There were house restrictions in place on us and there were curfews and in the evening we could not go out. But, we had to have our doors to our homes unlocked. We could close them, but they had to be unlocked because the patrols, the Germans with their Greek collaborators, who often went around wearing masks, they would come in at night to make sure that there were no strangers in the house and only those who were the renters of a particular house were in there. And I remember very vividly one evening towards midnight, German patrols did come into our house and they came with a flashlight in my bed to look who was in there. I was 8 years old and you don't forget that kind of experience.

I: I'm sure. It's very horrifying.

Petrakis: In the Fall of 1943, the country had many ambushes of German troops outside of Sparta. The Germans collected 119 citizens, mostly male, but also some women. The youngest was 17-year-old high school student one of four brothers, and the oldest in the group was, I don't remember, but, probably in his sixties. One of those 119 people were let go but then the others, and I remember seeing them off packed in three trucks were taken out of Sparta, they were taking to Tripolis and then they were brought in Monodentri which is near Sparta. There was a winding road there and this is where the Germans had suffered casualties before. They brought the hostages, *ομήρους* <"hostages"{080}>, hostages, they put them on the beach and they executed them in cold blood and then they piled them on three trucks and they brought them through Sparta to the cemetery and they were buried in two long ditches, they were just thrown in there. I saw the trucks when they took the hostages from Sparta and then I saw them when they brought them back bodies strewn in the trucks, quite horrible event. So, things like these do stay in your mind and I have covered these things in a little book that I wrote recently in a historical novel format and it does exist in the library of San Francisco State Greek Collection.

I: It's in Greek?

Petrakis: It is in Greek. I have recently translated it and I'm attempting to publish it in English because I have been urged by those who have read it that it ought to be saved or the memories or the testimonies that I'm offering there ought to be saved. So I have covered those events in that book, however, I should say that even though as a youngster you experience the horrors of war and family and occupation, you still grow up and you still play, you still look at the girls, you still go on. But I think there is no doubt in my mind that those horrific events did affect my life as it did the subsequent civil war that was fought very differently.

I: Can you reflect a little on the civil war that followed and how that impacted your life?

Petrakis: Uh, the civil war started, I guess, 1946, after the Germans had left. Although in December of 1944, there were clashes in between the left and the right and the British intervened and the left was defeated. Actually Winston Churchill on Christmas Day personally came to Athens to sort of reconcile the two sides although he was clearly on one side, attempting to bring back the king. Although I think the great majority did not want the king-

I: Who was the king then?

Petrakis: George, the Second.

I: King George?

Petrakis: Yes. Uh, but eventually, of course, years later, in the 70s there was a plebiscite and the, the Greek royal house, the so called Greek royal house- I guess I'm revealing my politics here.

I: Well, <laughs> It was not originally Greek.

Petrakis: Of course not. That's right. Uh, they were voted out in the plebiscite by the overall majority of the Greeks. They did away with the royalty. Uh, but the civil war started, I mean (excuse me), lasted for about three years and it ended with the defeat of the Communists in 1949. Pretty horrendous experience and in a way, there is a perhaps nothing as horrendous as patricide. In the little book that I made reference to earlier there's a variation on a theme that Thucydides first described. In fact I have in my book a quotation from Thucydides that, while the Greeks were united, they defeated the barbarians, the Persians. But then shortly thereafter they turned on each other and it was the same thing in the '40s. The Greeks resisted bravely the Nazis. In fact, they contributed in the first Allied vctories, it was 1940 in Albania against the Italians. But then, they turned on each other with terrible results.

I: Did your move to Athens have anything to do with the civil war? Did your father need to get away from-

Petrakis: My father died during the Second World War so by the time the civil war began, he – that was not an issue. But, the main reason for our moving to Athens was economics. Greece was extremely poor and especially the countryside there were no opportunities. I did have relative, my mother's brother in Athens. So, we decided to move to Athens although it was clear that at some stage, at the first opportunity, we would come to the United States because my mother's family was in the United States except the one brother that I mentioned.

I: Can you tell me how large Sparta was when you lived there? Approximately? Was it – what the population might have been?

Petrakis: Sparta was, still is, a small town by American standards certainly. Uh, I would guess the population was about eight to ten thousand people. Uh, still, it is in the lower teens. It's a very interesting, a very beautiful town. It is one of two built by Bavarian design by Bavarian engineers that the king, the great house imposed on Greece after Greece was liberated. And his wonderful street design, wide streets which have wonderful classical Greek classical as well as Byzantine names so Spartans are always obviously very proud

of the continuity and their heritage. But it is a small town. I would guess right now it's probably less than 15,000.

I: You mentioned to me an experience that you had when you first moved to Athens and went to school and the teacher introduced you. Could relate that?

Petrakis: Well, it's an interesting tidbit, indeed. Because of the civil war, getting to Athens, it was a very difficult process. There was a single train that was running from Tripoli to Athens and buses were difficult and so on. Anyway, when I got to Athens, I was in sixth grade and I went to school immediately, of course. But I was late by about a month. And I guess there had been some discussion about the Peloponnesian War- I don't know. But the teacher, I still remember her, Kyria Maria (Κυρία- means Mrs.) introduced me to the Athenian kids and said, "Please do welcome Leonidas, who has just arrived from Sparta." I was booed by some of these kids. And I was kind of flabbergasted, what was going on? I think they were taking out on the loss of part of Athens on Spartans in the Peloponnesian War.

I: Which was what year?

Petrakis: Well, it ended at the end of the fifth century, 404, I guess, since that lasted for thirty years or so, from 330 to 404. So, the Greeks then have long memories and the irony is that I did not know what they were talking about. Later on of course I was told that since I was a Spartan, I was a hated enemy. Now of course, by the way, I'm an Athenian citizen because I transferred my papers from Sparta to Athens so. And if there were to be another war between Athens and Sparta, I would happen to have divided loyalties. I'm not sure which side I would come down on.

I: Thank you. Dr. Petrakis, I would like to find out what led you to leave Greece and when you left.

Petrakis: We left--my mother, my older sister, my only sister, and I--we left Greece in August of 1951. And we went to New York but immediately on to Boston where we had relatives.

I: May I ask you what you brought with you. And did you come by ship?

Petrakis: Yes. We did come by boat, Nea Ellas was the boat that we came on. It was, I think a seventeen day trip, if I remember correctly. It was a magnificent experience in the Mediterranean. It was August and wonderful, balmy nights. I was 16. I was going off to the great USA. And I was in seventh heaven. When we did get into the Atlantic, I guess we must have run across the remnants of a hurricane and that was quite a horrendous experience. I remember the crew talking about 18 meter high waves.

I: Quite high.

Petrakis: It is. And the boat was going from one side to the other. Most people did get sick on the boat. And the dining rooms were empty at noontime and evening.

I: Who could eat?

Petrakis: Exactly. Exactly. Eventually we came to Halifax, where we made a brief stop and I remember I was so astounded by the site. It was so green and so lush. And it contrasted

so sharply with the barren Greek countryside. The mountains, as I'm sure you know, around Athens are highly diluted since antiquity. So seeing this marvelous, lush green forests in Canada was an incredible site for me. Then from Halifax, we went on to New York. Actually, we disembarked at Hoboken, NY, which I guess is the home of Frank Sinatra?

I: New Jersey.

Petrakis: New Jersey- excuse me, Hoboken, New Jersey. Thank you. We were met by relatives. We were whisked through the tunnel in NY and then on to Boston. Uh, when we left Greece, we left, and I'm very sorry now, all our possessions back. There had been family things from old bronzes to wood carvings, woven things, and so on. We abandoned, left everything there.

I: Did your mother's brother stay behind?

Petrakis: Yes. Uncle Nick did stay. He was the only one. In the US there were six other uncles and aunts spread from Boston to Los Angeles. Most of them on the east coast. When we came, we brought, of course, a few things – gifts for relatives: handicrafts and small things. But we brought very few things for ourselves. It was, in a way, a naïve kind of thing because, like all immigrants dream, life is easy and everything grows on trees in the US. Of course, the realities are different; you have to work at it. Things that we brought and we valued were photographs and family memorabilia, and so on. But what I brought was, what, it was some books. Brought a New Testament, brought some poetry, brought a bunch of volumes of a new encyclopedia that had- would be published at the time. This is important in the following way: at the end of this second world war, Greece was completely devastated by the Germans. And, there was not very much written material around. We did have access to some books and so on, so that set of volumes of this very large encyclopedia had been a very important item for me. So they were specially bound and they were brought in a wooden cart and my relatives from Boston were kind of shocked because they had to worry about carting books, or shipping books, they were not quite accustomed to that. But those were very valuable possessions. But the biggest thing that we came with, maybe it sounds a bit corny- I don't mean it in this way, but a very big thing was the great satisfaction and the great expectation of being here finally. I always knew that I would come to the United States for two reasons: one, was because we did have relatives- this was after the devastation of the war. But also there was this undefinable but very real dream about the US. And I remember us kids would read and talk about American heroes. The expectation during the Second World War was that, since many Greeks had been disillusioned by the British, that the Americans, together with the Russians would set things straight. The Greeks- Roosevelt was a great hero- as youngsters in high school, we were reading, we were talking about the founding fathers and Jefferson and all these wonderful things. My backyard in Sparta had lots of wonderful lemon trees and orange trees and to this day, I remember very fondly it was this great orange tree although my favorite flowers were the lemon tree blossoms. But from the orange trees, there was one that was very, very special for me. It would produce only two or three very large oranges and we were referring to it as our California orange tree. I have no idea whether it had anything to do with California, but since it was the very best, the most wonderful, there it was that recollection of California dream.

I: Did you know that you would eventually settle in California?

Petrakis: I fully expected that. I fully expected that- again, not in a rational, well-defined way, but as a gut feeling. And eventually I did get the opportunity to come out. But first we settled in Boston, actually Brookline, one of the suburbs where I finished high school.

I: You had- did you find it difficult to- for the transition from Greek high school to the American high school?

Petrakis: Yes and no. Yes in the sense that I didn't speak any English, really when I came. I had had some lessons and I had a very limited vocabulary. And, I difficulty with the American pronunciation- trying to understand things and so on. So it was only two weeks after I arrived in the United States that I was put in the third year high school at Brookline High. And in regular classes, total immersion. And it worked for me, I must say. It was very difficult. I remember I could take Algebra, English, US History, and- Chemistry, Algebra, US History, and English- those were the four core courses. And the teachers were just absolutely fantastic, very, very supportive- really reaching out and helping. But, I had from day one to perform. I was taking the same tests like everybody else. It was a total immersion. And, and, it was very hard. Just to illustrate how hard, really, one assignment early on, I remember, was that we had to read over the weekend a book by Lytton Stratchey I guess I pronounce his name correctly- *Queen Victoria*. He was one of the Victorian authors and I sat down to write and learn all the English words and by the end of the weekend, I must have had a few hundred words down. But I'm not sure I can go beyond- I don't know, page 10 or 15 or 30 or whatever it was.

I: Did you have your dimitrakos, dictionary, or how did you translate the words?

Petrakis: I was staying with some relatives at the time in Brookline who were quite well off, but not into books, if you will. So, initially, I had no dictionaries and what I was doing was: I would listen to the radio, by, not myself ,but used the newspaper that my relatives had and read and imply from the context to realize what the word was. But, a couple of months into that, we met some other relatives and these relatives were very much into books. And I was given an old libris dictionary, which I used. I also started using the English dictionaries from the very beginning. I have such incredibly fond memories of my two years in high school in Brookline. This is the same high school that Michael Dukakis finished a couple of years before I got there. There was a very large Jewish community in Brookline and I think, most of the Central European Jews valued obviously education greatly. It was very competitive but extremely supportive and it was just a marvelous experience for me. Both of my classmates, for the most part, there were some bumps here and there, and my teachers, they were just fantastic.

I: Was there a large Greek community in Brookline?

Petrakis: No. In fact in Brookline High School, as I recall, there were two, three other Greek kids that I met. Did not have the cultural diversity that we see now. But, there were very few Greeks – I think 3, 4 that I came across.

I: What did you do during the summer between your third and fourth year, do you recall?

Petrakis: Uh, yes, actually, both during the school year and during the summer, I worked. And, I'm glad about that – it was necessary, but also I regret it because working after school did not allow me to participate in some of the extracurricular activities. For example, I

had been a pretty good runner and I was approached to be a part of the cross-country team and so on, but I was unable to do that.

I: No time to train?

Petrakis: No time to train. In fact, during the school hours, noontime, I worked in the cafeteria picking up trays in the cafeteria. And after hours, I worked in all kinds of different jobs. And also during the summer a silversmith polishing silver and making deliveries. I worked at a ice-cream place on School Street in Boston across from the old city hall. I worked at Stop N' Shop as a cashier. I did a lot of different jobs.

I: Did your sister attend school? She was older, you mentioned…

Petrakis: Yes, she had finished high school in Greece, I had not. And so the family needed to support itself- we needed to support ourselves so everybody worked. My mother worked, she had never worked outside of the house in Greece so it was necessary for her to do this. My sister had finished high school did find a job in an office, but she went evenings to school to develop some secretarial skills. And, of course, I worked also.

I: Then, when it was time for college, how did you decide what you wanted to do and where you wanted to go?

Petrakis: That's an interesting question. I have thought about that a great deal and it's amazing how sometimes accidents shape our lives. Like all youngsters, I guess I had ambitions of all kinds that only exceeded my capacity by a long measure. But I knew I would go on to college. That was a given. And I came from a background of education- it was a given. When I finished high school, on my senior year, I applied to UCLA where I was accepted because I had relatives in the Los Angeles. But, in the summer of 1953, after I finished high school, I went by Greyhound bus from Boston to Los Angeles. That was an incredible experience.

I: By yourself?

Petrakis: By myself. And it was such a soaring experience to see the great countryside and to see the explanation of Carl Sandburg and the others who sing praises of the American countryside. A book I had read, for example had influenced me greatly was about Scandinavian immigrants, *Giants on Earth*. And you see the trains with beautiful names and the tall, ripe corn at the time. It was just amazing. Also it was very sad to see some other things. I went by bus from Boston to New York and then to Chicago, then Chicago, changed buses Greyhound, and we took Route 66. Route 66 when it was still Route 66. But we stopped at a couple of places and it was early 50s and horrible things that we knew by hearsay about American blacks, you still could see-

I: Yes, quite evident in that period.

Petrakis: You know toilets for white ladies but for colored women and same with fountains and so on. I was shocked from that experience.

I: I remember that myself.

Petrakis: Anyway we did go to Los Angeles and it was an astounding experience. Its immensity and its vibrancy. Anyway, I don't like Los Angeles anymore. I much prefer San Francisco. I'm sorry but-

I: You're not alone.

Petrakis: I studied at the school- at UCLA. But during the summer and after school, I worked at May Company. I was…

I: At the department store?

Petrakis: Yes, I was stacking the men's shirts and things like this. For a hundred reasons, I went back to Boston after a few weeks because initially my mother and my sister were to follow me and the whole family would move to Los Angeles. But, that did not quite work out so I went back to Boston. Again by Greyhound bus, but this time I was fortunate and went through the northern route. Utah and Nebraska, and so on. It was a just a great experience. And I went back to Boston and I matriculated at Northeastern University which has a co-op program for a bachelors degree you go five years and after your first year, you work at a job that is related to your discipline. And for some reason, I had declared a Chemistry major. Quite frankly my heart was in writing. The only thing, quite frankly, that I knew was Greek and I was fascinated by the language and by the history. I also had some exposure to Latin and French. But as I contemplated writing possibilities, who wants to read anything that I'm able to write and write it in Greek so I said, "I have to declare a different major." And there were a few things that I knew I did not want to do: engineering, business, accounting, things like these. So I declared Chemistry and I studied chemistry at Northeastern University where I got my bachelors degree.

I: You said you, after the first year, were- would be able to work and you got paid- or got paid your tuition or your books?

Petrakis: Yes. Yes. To start with, I had some scholarships for my first year. I had some money from the Helicon Society. It was a group of Greek professionals in Boston. Helicon Society – this is where the muses' ideas lead – Helicon. Uh, and these people were sponsoring some Greek kids. And, the rest of my tuition was paid by the Charles N. Kayden Foundation through Northeastern University. I applied for the scholarship. After the first year, I was able to support myself. Also, I guess there was some, still some scholarship money, so both from my working. But my job related to my chemistry curriculum and also to my own work.

I: And you were able to live at home?

Petrakis: Yes. Yes, we lived at home. I lived at home until I left in 1958 to go to graduate school. By then my sister was married and I left to come to California.

I: So you went to graduate school in California, should-

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I: Dr. Petrakis, could you tell us a little about your experience coming to Berkeley to graduate school?

Petrakis: Uh, yes, I guess I could say a few things. I mentioned earlier that I always expected to not in a reasonably way- but I did expect that I'd go to California. And my first attempt was short-lived as I said earlier, but when I finished my undergraduate degree in Boston, the opportunity came up for me to come to California. I applied to two schools: MIT (where I was accepted) and Berkeley. Professor Charles Correa, a very famous professor at MIT, he wanted me to go to MIT, but I told him I was waiting to hear from Berkeley. And he did tell me, he said, "If they accept you at Berkeley, I recommend you go to Berkeley." He impressed me very much with that. Well, Berkeley did come through- they did offer me acceptance to the graduate program and I was delighted because the Chemistry Department has been one of the very best chemistry departments in all universities. Or, I'll go even this far: although I'll be accused of being prejudiced, that probably by far the strongest department of all chemistry departments. Anyway, I did accept their offer and I was going study nuclear chemistry- this was the late 50s. I was quite naïve – I had no idea what nuclear chemistry was all about, but there were very famous nuclear chemists here in Berkeley. But then when I realized what was going on, I gave up on nuclear chemistry, I switched advisors, I worked for a young man who had just begun his career at Berkeley and I did some work in nuclear magnetic resonance which has nothing to do with nuclear energy. But, it is the foundation of what we refer to as MRI.

I: In the medical field?

Petrakis: That's right. And MRI, I understand, deliberately dropped from its name the "nuclear" even though it involves the nuclear spin so people would not feel badly to examine the true MRI apparatus. Anyway, I did come to Berkeley in September of 1968 – I came by train. And I was quite fortunate. My thesis worked out quite well and I finished in 3 years, my doctorate. Those three years in Berkeley were probably the most exciting, the most stimulating years that I have had. It was just a fabulous experience, the intellectual stimuli and the way Cal was approaching things intellectual and the demands being made on you and the contacts you had with very bright faculty and extremely bright students. All this- well, it shaped my life and they were incredibly memorable years.

I: I would like to get into your personal life a little. I believe you were married around that period? Can you elaborate a little on your life and when you met her and how you came to get married?

Petrakis: Yes, we can talk a little about that, but I'm not quite sure this being community oriented and this being saved for posterity, I guess one has to be discreet. <laughs> I married Lyna in 1959. She was born of Greek parents in Boston. I saw her casually when I first arrived. I saw her, quite frankly, in Greek Church and I had tried to convince her since then that I had this thought when I saw her: I didn't even know her name and so on but I said, "I'm going to marry this child, this woman, this girl someday." And eventually this did happen. We started dating when we were in college. I came to Berkeley by myself and then after I had been here in Berkeley for a few months, one evening, while I was working inside the cyclotron at Berkeley, trying to set up an experiment, I decided that Berkeley's an immensely exciting place, but one needs good company. So, I-

I: You wanted to share some Berkeley insights with her, I suppose?

Petrakis: Well, I called her and I said, "Would you like to come out, get married?" And of course, she said, "Yes". We did get married June of the following year, 1959, and we came out and indeed, some of our dates as married people were at the university. She came and even though she had no technical training, she turned buttons on equipment and she jotted down dates, and so on. Since I had long hours at the university, she came and she spent lots of time with me. While I was a graduate student, we had our first child, a girl. Of course by then it's Ismini, which is my mother's name. Ismini was born on August 4, kind of a terrible day in modern Greek history--it was the anniversary of the fascist dictatorship of General Metaxas. But she was born in Berkeley at Alta Bates Hospital and now she's on the faculty at Yale Medical School. She's an associate professor of Psychiatry. Married to Michael, an Irish Quaker. Michael is a wonderful, very bright guy and the two of them, they have two children, Alexander Michael, my grandson (he was born in '94) and Zoe Catarini was born- is now two and half years old. We have also, besides Ismini, a son. His name is Alexis. He was born in Woodington, Delaware on another terrible day. He was born on November 22, 1963, about an hour after John Kennedy's assassination. I remember I got the news to my wife who was still under medication and so on because she had a cesarean. And she could hear me, but she could not quite comprehend John Kennedy who was a senator from Massachusetts. And I knew- in fact had worked for him for the election 1960 here in California. Jack was a charismatic guy, maybe naughty as a person, but…still quite charismatic. My son unfortunately shares another terrible date. But he's a great guy; he lives in Chicago and it's a beautiful city except for the terrible during the winter- winter months. So that is my entire immediate family. My mother's still living-

I: How old is she?

Petrakis: She's 97. She was born in 1904. And it's interesting to contemplate the incredible changes that she has witnessed from 1904 when there no cars in Greece to recently when I installed email in my home. She sat there and she typed away one finger message to one of her grandchildren, Alexi, actually.

I: Does your sister live nearby your mother?

Petrakis: Yes, my sister lives in Boston and my mother is in Boston. Right now, actually, because she's in poor health, except for her mind is working clear as I said, she is in a nursing home that was built by the Greek community. It's a wonderful, wonderful facility. I wish many more Greek churches and communities would build something worthwhile rather than more structures-

I: Yes, that's very admirable. I didn't realize the Greek community had done that.

Petrakis: They have. They just celebrated 20th year. It's a great, great undertaking. And I admire- it's run by women. And I admire these women. They have done such a magnificent job over the years.

I: Wonderful. Dr. Petrakis could you tell us about your professional development?

Petrakis: Uh-

I: After your graduate school.

Petrakis: Yes. When I finished University of California in Berkeley, I went to the National Resource Council Laboratories in Ottowa, Canada with a fellowship from the Canadian government where I did postdoctoral research. Then my first job was at the University of Maryland in College Park. Then for financial reasons, I don't mind saying that – I left academia and I went temporarily to industry. But I was fortunate while I was in industry- I was able to pursue my research interests and for many years at the same time, I was adjunct professor and this was at the University of Pittsburgh. Then, I went to Brookhaven National Laboratory, New York, where I was senior scientist and I chaired the Department of Applied Science, one of the largest departments at Brookhaven. And two years ago, I retired from Brookhaven and went back to California.

I: May I ask – is Brookhaven an educational- a teaching institution?

Petrakis: Brookhaven is one of the national laboratories that are- what is known as GOCO, government-owned, company-operated. And it does have teaching functions in terms of research, but does not award degrees. At the time that I left, pretty much, it was being run by AUI, Associated Universities Inc., a not-for-profit corporation that had been established by the Ivy League schools plus MIT plus the University of Rochester. And it is a very interesting fascinating highbrow place. A number of Nobel Prizes in physics, for example, have been awarded for research that was carried out at Brookhaven. I was there for 10 years. I was registered for a number of years. There were also--I taught, besides my adjunct professorship at the University of Pittsburgh, in some other universities – I spent one sabbatical at University of Athens in 1997 and I had two briefer sabbaticals at the University of Paris in France. My research interests over the years have been in problems in the interface of energy in the environment. And by energy, I mean non-nuclear energy- I nothing to do over the years with nuclear energy. But I had been concerned with the effects of the production and use of energy. And, I had been involved with things like oil pollution in the oceans, air pollution, cleaner fuels – energy efficiency. Most of my studies have been fundamental studies. I have authored or co-authored or edited half a dozen scientific books and my research has been published in- oh, it has appeared in something like over 150 scientific papers in peer reviewed journals. And also I had been fortunate- I had been invited and I have lectured over the years in a number of interesting places. I gave lecture, for example, once at the Royal Society of London and I've been to Japan and China and all over Europe, and of course, all over the United States, Mexico and Canada. I have had a very happy and very satisfying professional career; I've taught, I've done research, I have overseen the careers some of my immigrant men and women as graduates or post docs or junior colleagues. I still have the interest in the science, but at this stage in my career, I'm turning more to the history of science and to ethical issues involved with science. Most of us go into science and we never ask about the ethical implications of the research that we may do and sometimes it's too late. And uh, I'm involved with some writing, but that it is too early to discuss at this stage.

I: Scientific writing?

Petrakis: Uh, yes, the history and the ethics of scientific research. In contrast to the writing that I have done so far, which has been for the most part fundamental and technical nature. But I want to move to the societal aspects of research. In fact, I have done a little bit and some years back, I published a little monograph in Greek about the air pollution in the Athens basin. Athens, as I remember it when I was growing up and as I used to see it

when I first got there, was great place with this impeccable light that French and English romantics wrote almost in ecstasy when they first encountered the Acropolis. But Athens has become a terrible place. There is air pollution. It reminds me, one, of Los Angeles, for example because Athens, like Los Angeles, has this great gift of sunlight which of course means deadly in terms of promoting air pollution when it's combined with hydrocarbons which are emitted from cars. And so- so I did write this little monograph and in a sense, I became persona non grata in Greece because some of my fellow Athenians, they said there's no air pollution problem in Athens, which is, of course-

I: Denial.

Petrakis: Denial, denial, exactly. More recently, again, towards the societal aspect of science, I have written on energy efficiency and transportation, which we all know what a horrible thing it is even in this beautiful Bay Area we have horrible congestion. Most people choose to wrap themselves in two-three thousand pounds of metal and plastic in horrible isolation, drive to their job in the morning and from their job in the afternoon. That's a horrible, as far as I'm concerned, experience and it is very unproductive and contributes, in my opinion, to our air pollution problems in addition to great inefficiencies and so on. So these are two bridges that I could be using to work towards the broader issues of history of science and academic research that we as individuals may do.

I: I remember reading you had written a book about asbestos and could you elaborate a little on that book, on that research?

Petrakis: I do not have a book, but I have several publications. While I was still at Brookhaven National Laboratory, we did a joint research program for the innovative approach to dealing with the asbestos problem which has been a very difficult situation and it has been correlated, at least some forms, of exposure to- exposure to some forms of asbestos have been causally related to cancer or some cancers of the lungs. I'm not a medical person and I cannot discuss this, but as a chemist. I was involved, in fact I lead an effort at Brookhaven National Laboratory that studied with some fundamental science who developed new chemical approaches and commercialized a process for dealing in situ with asbestos that has been applied in schools and other structures. And, I should mention that it's cost-effective, since there's so much concern these days about the bottom line of everything you know. So that was a tremendously exciting possibility, development. It was jointly done between Brookhaven National Laboratory with funding coming from US government and a private company that they did provide their own funding, and it speaks to the paradigm that joint research involving universities, national laboratories, and private sector some good things can be done, but it can't be said to be right, and the opportunity for carrying this out had to be there. I spent about 4 years leading this effort at Brookhaven and it was at the end of that that I took retirement and decided to do something different with my life here in California.

I: Dr. Petrakis could you give us some of your feelings of your identity as an American?

Petrakis: Uh, yes. I'm glad you're raising that issue especially given what is going on right now in the US and in California, especially about diversity and multiethnicity and identity. Uh, that's an issue about which I feel very, very strongly and my views are quite straightforward. The minute I came to the US, and especially when I became formally a citizen – and I became a citizen as quickly as I could – I felt as an anointed American, but I still continued to feel as a Greek because I feel there is no discrepancy - there is not a

zero-sum gain that if I have some alliance here I have to take it from there. Not only because of the relatedness between values that Greek developed and espoused over the years and they have found their way to the thinking of the founding fathers, but also because by definition in my mind, you don't have to cut from one to the other. So, I could completely bilingual and completely bicultural. I can appreciate and share some of the prides and pains that the Greeks may feel and the same with the US. I'm very proud of my Greek heritage and I'm very proud of my American citizenship participation. I'm grateful for the opportunity I was given when I first came and at that time, we were just very happy to be here – made no demands on anybody, just used the opportunity to contribute and I like to think that we have and I'm very happy that my children were born here. I had a wonderful professional career and I do travel in Greece but I consider right now California my home. So, I see no conflict, in fact, I see a great deal of synergy between my Greekness and my American, you know, I think.

I: Have you ever felt that you were discriminated against because of your Greek or ethnic heritage?

Petrakis: Look, there are always bumps on every road, but there's no point in lingering on those bumps. You go over them and you go on. There are dumb people or people who say dumb things always – you'll find them. But, ignore that and just go on. What I want to emphasize is that from day one, I found and I was so lucky to have wonderful people, understanding, very eager to help and I remember guidance and their support. The others who may not have, you know, in fact, make - I don't remember them that much.

I: Do you feel that your Greek heritage distinguished you in some way in your social interactions with people of other backgrounds?

Petrakis: Ah, I don't know whether it was my Greek background per se or family or combination…but I have always been very much interested in other people, in other people's affairs and cultures. Maybe I have a bit of the Odysseus nature in me also seeking to find new ways and experience new cultures but I have found these contacts to be very enriching for me. I delight whenever I travel or wherever I travel, I try to learn a few words if I don't speak the language to at least be able to greet people in their own native language. I like to do some reading when I become exposed to other cultures and those have paid off tremendously. For example, I remember when I went to Japan, just before, I did a great deal of reading and research and so on. But one of the most fascinating introductions was when I read Kazantzakis' account of his sojourn to China and Japan. He was so vivid and I took advantage of his tremendous research and I thought his writings were so relevant to my experience so I seek actively diversity and I enjoy it and I delight in it and I find it enriching now. Perhaps as I said earlier a bit of Odysseus in one's soul does help.

I: Can you tell us what you think is important about the ancient Greek heritage of the Greeks?

Petrakis: Well, it is heritage that I don't think belongs exclusively to the Greeks. I think it is there for everyone and not just because western culture values it and was influenced by the Greeks so much. Since I did not even finish high school in Greece, my exposure, my study of classical Greece has not been what I wanted it to be so now in retirement, I'm trying to bridge that gap and I am formally studying Classical Greek at the University of California in Berkeley continuing the tradition of my good luck of having come across

wonderful people, they still obtain in Berkeley Professor Ron Stroud, the great classicist who was the first one to accept me in his class. So, last semester I did with him a marvelous reading of Herodotus. I had read Herodotus in English translation but if I may say it ain't the same thing as in the original. And this semester I'm doing a course on Plato and Aristotle, Professor Long. I can be ecstatic in describing some of the achievements of the classical Greeks and I claim that heritage as my own of course. I'm very proud of it. But not in a shallow, chauvinistic way but rather something that is very significant in all of us to partake. I'm particularly impressed by the Greek language; the way it developed subtleties and refinements. It is just something very exquisite and I guess the Greeks did need to develop the language in such a sophisticated manner since they had to deal with ideas – with subtleties of ideas, investigating the cosmos for outside and also in their in own souls so they did need this very refined construct. I have had some exposure to Latin, French, German, Modern Greek but if I may be allowed to be a bit parochial if you wish to accuse me of that, there is nothing quite like the classical Greek. It's a marvelous construct and I take great delight in being able to read some of the text in classical Greek. And I think that's something that should have a message for all of us in developing language skills. No matter what, it should be a very important part of everybody's development. And I may say that in this country, the US, I don't think we do a good enough job teaching our children enough languages. Of course we don't need, since English is the lingua franca, we do not need to learn somebody else's language. But once you learn another language that is another dimension in our lives – it opens horizons. So, I would hope that our educational system really can do a much better job in terms of teaching children foreign languages. And I think this is especially important for children who come from bilingual backgrounds. To me, English has to be first and foremost, this is our entire world. I think what a poor job many Greek families, for example, have done in not teaching their children Greek. And it's a crime and the same with other groups who neglect their own languages and their own backgrounds – I think that's a disservice.

I: Well, that takes me to our final area of thought. And I would like to ask since you have two grandchildren, what values from your Greek background would you like to pass on to them?

Petrakis: Wow, that's a terrible, terrible responsibility. So, I have shifted that, I have delegated that to their mother and their father. However, as a grandparent, I can do it, and I do do it and with my wonderful grandchildren. Clearly, the heritage that you are talking about is something that I hope they grow up to inherit and to appreciate and to value. And the same, of course, of the American side. Discovery of the many wonderful things that this much newer culture has to offer. But I don't have a specific program or articulated position. Nevertheless, I can share with you that both my children learned to read and write Greek. I still communicate with my children in Greek and so I do with my two grandchildren and both of them show an interest in learning and responding in Greek, especially Alexander, who is six, but Zoe, who's only two and a half now, she has had some vocabulary in Greek. I read to them or I relate to them mythology – great emphasis on Greek mythology, it's very simple. But my approach to them is, I think helped with, stimulate their inquisitiveness and their ability to ask questions and discover themselves and also their world. To me, that is a great component their growing up and like you said, development. And that is a very old, in a way, Greek thing is it not? Keep asking questions, keep asking questions – in some cases that doesn't pay very well as Socrates found out – to keep asking too many questions, but I think we do need to question ourselves and inquire about environment – our environment and our cosmos.

I: Thank you so much, Dr. Petrakis, for the interview – it's been a delight talking with you.

Petrakis: Thank you very much, you're very kind and very generous, Pattie. And also thanks to Gentle for coordinating this.

END OF THE INTERVIEW